DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 155 672 CS 004 192

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TITLE Poetry: A Legacy of the Growing Self.
PUB DATE Nov 77
NOTE 10p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the California Reading Association of the International Reading Association (11th, Anaheim, California, November 2-5, 1977)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Bibliographies; Child Language; *Composition (Literary); *Creative Activities; *Creative Writing; *English Instruction; Figurative Language; Imagery; Intermediate Grades; Language Arts; *Poetry; *Self Expression; Teaching Techniques

ABSTRACT

Young children use poetic language naturally in that they express themselves through metaphors, colorful images, and unique word choice. Since this ability has often been repressed by the time children reach the middle grades, this article suggests classroom activities intended to stimulate children's natural poetic expression. These activities, based on a definition of poetry as the expression of one's personal self, stress sharing oneself with others in the following ways: rhyming words, sharing stories that have poetic language in them, writing "I am" poems, composing single line poems, constructing metaphors and similes, developing sensory awareness, and writing free verse. The article includes a list of children's books that can be used to motivate and encourage children in the writing of poetry. (MAI)

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POETRY: A LEGACY OF THE GROWING SELF

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Poetry is the natural conversation of the very young. The built-in ability of children to use their language; to make it dance and sing for them as few adults really can, gives children a magic with words that is difficult to recapture once they have been "properly trained" to use language "correctly." The gurgling and babbling sounds of the baby are merely hints of the rich and colorful language soon to come. The stories, descriptions, comments and explanations of the two-to five-year old are filled with original and unique uses of his language. Yet given three or four more years, these young ones will often lose the fascination they once had for language and the natural poet in them may be lost forever.

The rich language which many children bring to school has often disappeared by the end of the second grade. One begins to wonder whether there is some correlation between the desire to eradicate play from the young child's schooling and the loss of a child's natural language. Poetry, of course, has disappeared from the classroom as rapidly as have blocks, doll house corners and sand/water play. In our quest to have children do "proper" school work, we have deprived them of the play which is rightfully theirs. We have taken away most avenues of play; and play is the legacy of childhood.

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Poetry is a form of language play that can make a profound difference in the lives of children. The exploration of language which poetry provides is a legacy which cannot be denied our young. More importantly, poetry is a legacy of the growing self.

I CELEBRATE MYSELF

Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself" is one example of poetry which is an affirmation of the self. It is a sharing of oneself with another. It invites the reader to consider his own uniqueness and to filter life's experience "from" himself. The Little Circle by Ann Atwood (12) provides a similar focus. As the book begins:

> The first thing the Little Circle remembered was being drawn on a blackboard by a piece of chalk.
> "And this is a zero!" someone was saying.
> "And a zero is nothing! piped a small high voice.
> This is how the little circle learned that he was a zero,and that a zero is nothing.
> He felt sad and empty, and he thought about it for a long time. Then he had a very good idea.
> "Everything has to be something," he reasoned. "It is only a matter of finding out what that something is."

So the Little Circle begins his search for what he is. The Circle's search is everyman's search; the search for self. This search is never ending as the self continues to grow, learn, change, adapt, reject, reflect.... Poetry can help in the discovery of self. It is a personal form of expression which permits both the exploration and sharing of one's inner self. Poetry can ask the question, "Who Am I?" Children's poetry can answer that question and the answers will be many and varied because "the answer" is within each person. No other form of writing provides the freedom of poetry. No other form can more adequately celebrate the self.

PLAYING WITH WORDS

Poetry is an organic means of communication for the young. Their spontaneous conversation is sparked with poetic images, magical color and unique word usage.

Somehow, and sadly, by the time most children reach the middle grades, their poetic insides have been tempered often to the point of dull, rhythmic conformity. Yet the inner voice is still there, only to be awakened, nurtured and appreciated. Moffett and Wagner comment, "The poet is a profound player with language (7:250)." Words are as much playthings to the child as are his toys. The child's love of repetition, nonsense words, and unique word combinations attest to the word play phenomenon. Teachers can help children rediscover the delight which words can bring. For younger children, books such as "I Can't," Said the Ant (14) and The Hungry Thing (35) will spark the child's creation of his own sequences of rhymes or nonsense rhyming words.

Older children, and adults as well, will delight in hearing The King Who Rained (18) or A Chocolate Moose For Dinner (17) and in seeing the accompanying illustrations. The imprecision of English language has given us rich material for word play. Can you imagine what three- or four- year old imagines when he hears his mother say that she's serving chocolate moose (mousse) for dinner? Or, what pictures come to mind when we speak of the "arms race" or "gorilla (guerilla) warfare?" Children and adults can learn to see their language with all of its inconsistencies and at the same time learn to use the language so that it does what they want it to. The primary concern for teachers must be to help children learn to control their own language rather than being controlled by it. Using language is the only way to learn to control words, sentences and all other elements which fall under the heading of writing. Textbooks, workbooks, and ditto sheets rarely provide the type of language experiences children need. Rather, they tend to destroy a child's confidence in his writing and do not allow for the spontaneous language which is necessary for optimum language growth. A skillful author/poet has learned to use the language in his own personal way; a way that is unlike another's.

I AM

Regardless of subject matter most poetry is an expression of the poet's inner self. It is an extension of the individual's uniqueness and an expression of the value inherent in that uniqueness. The concept of "I Am" is expressed in most poetry. More specifically, we can even help children to write I Am poems which do not make a direct statement about the author. What, for example, would a candle say? The responses will be as numerous as the number of children in a class. One candle might say, "I am a candle defying the darkness." Another might comment, "I am a candle shedding hot, liquid tears." Additional samples of I Am poems are given below:

I am the sunset, sharing warm rays of color with a tired world.

I am a dog asking you to play with me.

I am happiness wrapped with a huge, red bow.

I am serenity; I travel with peace.

Although children are describing external objects or, as might be the case with older children, abstract concepts (e.g. serenity) the I Am is, in many ways, a personal expression of the individual's way of seeing, of feeling, of believing. In essence, the poem is a statement about the poet.

IN A SINGLE LINE

"A single original line that picks out something and compares it so it is experienced in a fresh way may be more profoundly poetic than the most elaborate of versifying (Moffett and Wagner, 7:262)." Older children, particularly, delight in composing one line "poems." If one considers the power of Haiku poetry, it is easy to see that much can be said with few words.

A poem is often thought of as several lines which conform to some type of form. It is true that certain types of poetry dictate both the number of lines and a definite form. There is, however, much that can be called poetry which conforms to neither form or line standards. Most of the poetry without specific form is labeled free verse. Free verse is very comfortable for most children because of its

lack of convention; lack of form and style. It suggests that even one line can be considered poetry. One liners are a valuable means of helping children who may lack confidence in speaking or writing. The child who comes to school without a natural flow of words (at least the type of words normally expressed in a classroom) will often find comfort in one line completions. The demand is not too great, yet the expression can be intensely personal. Some books which provide impetu for one liners are:

Happiness is a Sad Song (32)
A Friend is Someone Who Likes You (9)
Security is a Thumb and a Blanket (33)
A Hole is to Dig (25)
Love is a Special Way of Feeling (10)
If I Were a Cricket... (30)

In each case, the children attempt to give their own feelings in response to: "What is happiness to you," or "If you were a (child determines animal) what would you do?" Consistent exposure to this form of poetry will lead to more sophisticated expressions as the school year continues.

SIMILES AND METAPHORS

As children grow in their ability to observe, compare, classify and speculate about the world around them they will also grow in their ability to record their impressions on paper. The use of comparison, both direct and indirect, can be learned by children of all ages. Naturally, the complexity of their statements will vary with age and previous language background.

Most quality children's literature is filled with similes and metaphors. Children can learn to listen for ways authors describe people, places and things. They can discuss the images an author creates with words. Children can also create their own images if given assistance in recognizing ways to compare and contrast. Leo Lionni's Swimmy has several examples of similes and a marvelous metaphorical statement about a "medusa made of rainbow jelly."

A favorite of many teachers is The Sun is a Golden Earring (13) when introducing children to the world of metaphor. Although most children use similes as a part of their natural language flow, the metaphor does not appear to be as "organically" produced or understood. Children of upper elementary school age can , however, understand the concept of metaphor and incorporate metaphors in their writing.

WE ARE DIFFERENT DRUMMERS

Poetry, because it is very personal, knows no boundaries of time, space or culture. All children, at all ages, and from all backgrounds can benefit from poetry adventures. It is particularly important to remember, however, that the poems of all children will reflect their own lives and feelings. The thoughts of a black child may be very different from a child who has grown up in a predominantly white neighborhood. Books by authors such as Giovanni (16), Heide (19), Jones (21), Jordon (22,23) and McGovern (29) will give both teachers and children an opportunity to explore the writing and underlying feelings of many Americans. Children will soon come to see that poetry is, indeed, an expression of one's personal self. They will also learn to acknowledge the similarities and differences among us. A reading of Taro Yashima's Crow Boy (37) can spark a lively discussion about "being different." Appreciation of differences is essential for appreciation of poetry.

As children grow in their ability to dictate or record thoughts, free verse will become a natural poetic form for them. Once the initial groundwork has been laid, children will be able to write on any topic which they can related to directly. Sensory experiences are a must for children to be able to write poetry. They need to see, hear, smell, touch and taste; they need a plethora of stimuli. It is not sufficient to read a poem or two and then tell children to write. Nor is it appropriate to give children a recipe or formula for poetry and ask them to write. Neither approach provides the necessary inner food for honest and thoughtful self-expression.

Motivation for writing must take many forms because it will have to reach many different drummers. No two children will respond alike to the same stimulus and we can never be certain which activity, book or film will give a child that "magic" thought. In addition to concrete, manipulative experiences, a wealth of material can be found in children's books. Some of the books which have been successful for motivating poetry are listed below:

A Friend is Someone Who Likes You (9), That's What Friends Are For (19) and I'll Build My Friend a Mountain (24) all help children to focus on friendship and what friendship means to them.

What Color is Love? (11) can be used to explore different concepts of love.

All About Arthur (15) is a delightful book that can inspire alliteration poems.

Tico and the Golden Wings (28) is a sensitive account of what happens when one chooses to be "better" than another.

Hailstones and Halibut Bones (31) encourages a wide range of descriptions about color.

The Velveteen Rabbit (36) focuses on what it means to be real.

To be real---perhaps this is the hope that poetry brings to the writer. The hope that he or she will be able to express what is really felt in a way that will be honored simply because it is an expression of one person's way of seeing; in essence, being. Each of the aforementioned books provides for a variety of responses; each from a different drummer.

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